

Duxbury and America's Intranational War, 1861-65

(Commonly called "The Civil War")

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY



Detachment of Duxbury Union soldiers before the former G.A.R. Hall, now the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Merna, Washington St. The stained-

glass window on left is now in the King Caesar House.

Cemeteries are depressing places. No matter how we decorate the graves with flags, put in place beautiful marble monuments, manicure the greens (and our cemetery department is second to none in this), they remain depressing. For Christian believers they can be sources of faith in the Risen and Ascended Lord and Christ, but speaking as one who has had more than the average experience with them, they are full of sadness -- not only because they remind us of the shortness and uncertainty of life on this planet, but chiefly because they symbolize man's inhumanity to man. This was what Thomas Gray was trying to say in his "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," summarized in that central stanza:

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire
Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

And maybe that is why this poem has been rated by some as the most beautiful in the English language. It is a lament that as life is lived here and now, people's spirits are strangled, their imaginations suffocated, their wills distorted and short-circuited. Had they only had the chance, vast reservoirs of talent might have been released to the benefit of all mankind. This is the hard fact of life here. This to me is why cemeteries are places of sadness and depression.

I wonder what Thomas Gray would have done with a military cemetery, with its crosses lined up on the acres of green grass as they now stand at Verdun in France, on Okinawa, and Arlington to name only a few. What would he have written about the millions of our young men of all countries cut short before having a chance to share their insights and skills with their fellowmen? I recall visiting a Japanese military cemetery in Dairen, Manchuria where 125,000 men lie buried after a single battle in the Russo-Japanese war.

Our Civil War dead were practically all young men, in their teens and early 20s. What is more, Duxbury dead included venerable Pilgrim names like Alden, Delano, Freeman, Holmes, Wadsworth, Loring, Sampson, and Weston, to name a few. Suppose these men had been allowed to fulfill their lives? How different might have been the quality of life in this country? These are some of the thoughts that are in my mind as I look forward to joining in the Memorial Day celebration this year.

The Duxbury contingent was called the "Fourth Massachusetts Regiment" and was made up of men from Kingston, Pembroke and Duxbury. They mustered in and out in front of the old Temperance Hall on the site of the present St. Paul's Church. The call-up included similar contingents to those who faced British regulars on the old Dwyer farm in Marshfield in a near skirmish in 1775. Facts and figures and details are hard to come by for the war at that early date was pretty much a hit or miss affair. No one believed it could happen. Duxbury enlistments are reported around 300. Mayflower Cemetery records practically all of the dead, most of these are flagged in family plots and some are in Dingley Cemetery. Many names are inscribed on the granite memorial column given to the town by Ezra Weston that stands on the right of the main cemetery entrances. Fresh flags are provided on all veterans' graves each year by the American Legion.

Much of the material for this article came from a brochure given to S. Eliot Hunter from the estate of Ruby Graves and printed in 1863. The brochure contains the entire record of the 4th Regiment from mustering in to mustering out, and reveals many differences between warfare then and now. First of all, more time was spent in foraging expeditions for supplies than in combat. Second there were no formal

medical staffs to assist the wounded. Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War in 1854 had begun a kind of field hospital, but for the most part the only thing one could count on was the care of one's buddies if one were wounded in battle. By the time the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment arrived on the line, this had changed.

Congress had appropriated necessary funds and northern factories were turning out war goods in abundance. A third element was loyalty to the Flag -- the symbol of the war issue. Another complicating factor was the tenacity with which states and local municipalities clung to their traditional local loyalties. For example, this company only left for the war zones when the state militia had given its assent.

This emphasizes the basic war issue, which turned on the question of states rights. Did a single state have the independent power to secede from the Union? When the Constitution was finally ratified by all the state legislatures in 1789 there was enough doubt on the point so that Massachusetts had to be brought in line in the first rebellion against the new government (Shay's Rebellion, 1786). How individual states, once having subscribed to an overall central government, could be led by their legislators (who did some conniving on the matter) to feel that they could go off on their own as we look back from a perspective of a century and a half is hard to understand.

This was the issue of the contest, as Abraham Lincoln said in many of his speeches at the time. "If I could preserve the Union by keeping slavery, I would do it." But the slavery issue was the one that lay behind the struggle. It had dogged every administration since the beginning. The Declaration of Independence had declared that "all men are created equal," so how could this nation tolerate the degradation of thousands of people in the status of second-class citizens? So many attempts were made to compromise with this basic principle, and Supreme Court decisions and the methods of admission of new states into the Union had tried to balance the political power, but all had failed. President Lincoln had urged federal installations in the South not to commit any acts that would provoke retaliation, while federal troops on the drill grounds of our various forts throughout the South watched military preparations being made just across their fences.

Things finally came to a head when Lincoln warned the Governor of South Carolina that he was sending a convoy of supplies to Fort Sumter in the middle of Charleston Harbor. The convoy was turned back by cannon fire from shore batteries and then the Fort itself was forced to surrender. This was the technical beginning of perhaps the bloodiest war in the annals of American history.

On the surface, the issue was state sovereignty vs. national sovereignty. But the battle really was over the nature and structure of the young nation. Was it really serious in its cornerstone philosophy of human equality?

Duxbury has its own monument to the struggle in the fact of 2 churches on Washington St. Duxbury churches had been supported by the town's taxpayers. This is the way it was in the beginning, and this continued until 1828 when there were 3 churches in town. Seth Sprague had built and given to the Methodist congregation the present Episcopal church building (St. John's) in 1823. The slavery-abolitionist struggle was so hot that this church split in 2 and he then gave a new church building, the present Pilgrim Church, to one of the halves of the congregation and the other half moved back to join their Methodist brothers and sisters (c. 1845) in Ashdod (and subsequently to move to West Duxbury [1867] where it

now stands). This church building stood empty for several years and was finally bought for \$25 by a granddaughter of Seth Sprague and given to the then struggling Episcopal Mission.

Another extant artifact of this period is the former GAR Hall (Grand Army of the Republic, now the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Merna at 569 Washington St.). This building in my day was the social center of the town, its activities being sponsored by the "Sons of Veterans" who functioned then as the American Legion does now. The building was turned over to the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society in a very moving ceremony when Parker Chandler, the last ambulatory survivor of this period, turned over the key. It then became the Duxbury Baptist Church for many years, and was sold to a private owner, who, in turn, sold it to the Mernas, who have thoroughly modernized it to the extent of a solar greenhouse and a windmill! Much Civil War memorabilia is preserved by the Society in its papers in the Wentworth Library in the Drew House (opposite the old Cable office) and in the King Caesar House.

The Fourth Regiment went to active duty in Louisiana by steamer and tasted their first combat experience in a bayou near Baton Rouge, conquering a small town. One can catch a glimpse of what the fighting was like by this quote from the brochure I have mentioned: "Sunday, June 14, was the day chosen for the attack and the principal way of advance was by a road which after some distance from our camps ran parallel with some part of the enemy's works, and then neared them by a slight angular direction. The lines of battle were to be formed at early daylight. The skirmishers, the 4th Wisconsin, and 8th New Hampshire with the grenade party, consisting of companies of the 4th Mass., 2 of the 28th Connecticut, and one of the 110th New York, when sufficiently opposite the point selected to be charged upon filed out of the road into a field on the side opposite the enemy and deployed behind the hedge skirting the road, and then essayed to advance in line of battle.... Perfect silence was to be preserved but the skirmishers who had been plentifully supplied with whiskey, could not be restrained from shouting as they went. This, as was to be apprehended, apprised the enemy of their approach and quickly drew forth from the parapets a fire of murderous execution. Onward pressed brave men, only to be mowed down by bullets, grape, canister and shell. The havoc was terrible. All along the lines and angles of the opposing breastwork a continual volley flew, direct fire and cross-fire, before which rank after rank were cut down and swept away.... Our loss was very great. Suffice it to say the killed, wounded and missing in Gen. Paine's division alone reached 809, and our regiment which went into battle with 411 men, had 60 wounded, 6 killed and 3 missing."

Patriotic Ladies of Duxbury visited the regiment on Friday, Oct. 3, 1862, and presented the men with a flag and drum at which time some of these words were said from the Ladies: "Our glorious flag which has waved in triumph in every land and on every sea, they (the Rebels) would trample in the dust. Shall the good old Flag under which we have lived, and under which we hope to die, ever be torn down to give place to the Southern rag? No! 10,000 times NO!"

"You have nobly responded to your country's call to march forth to the battlefield to defend our country's flag. Please accept the one I now present to you, as a token of gratitude and love from those friends you leave behind. May it inspire your hearts with true courage to do your duty at all times and in all places. And ere long may you return in safety to the loved ones at home, after having restored the blessings of peace throughout this now unhappy land, and achieved a victory over every foe."

To which the recipients replied: "Ladies of Duxbury: Your patriotism and loyalty have found an appropriate manifestation in the presentation of this beautiful flag. It is the national flag...known and honored and respected abroad by all nations. Yet at home its hallowed folds are at this moment trampled on the dust by a wicked and unprovoked rebellion...."

In these words we get a glimmer of the horrors of this war and the depth of feeling that lay behind the mustering of the troops and the carrying forward of the essential power that was to turn the tide and assure that this nation, "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, and that the government of the people, by the people and for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

As Mrs. Dorothy Wentworth says in a closing paragraph of her inspiring book about our town, *The Settlement and Growth of Duxbury*, "Close on the end of the ship-building prosperity came the Civil War. The shore town of Duxbury could not survive 2 such heavy blows, one to its own particular economy and the other to the whole New England region. After a long slow climb from pioneering to general prosperity, there was no leveling off period, no gradual waning of activity....Nothing came along to ease the depression...gave way to what was largely a boarding era, and hardly a house passed up the seasonal income from summer boarders. Hotels and boarding houses gradually gave way to a summer population that bought many of the old houses and built others along the shore, until in the course of time, more and more stayed all winter and the town returned to year-'round owner-occupied houses."

Which brings us to where we are today. We are celebrating Memorial Day. Scouts and Brownies and

the DHS band and the Color Guard and other members of the American Legion have arranged a program at the First Parish Church and the Mayflower Cemetery. There will be military salutes and taps and prayers at our several cemeteries where our war heroes lie buried. It is a solemn occasion, and perhaps I should be criticized for beginning this article with a confession of sadness at cemeteries. Perhaps I should have said "sobriety" -- for the legacy our young men have left for us is one that has been bought at a very high price -- their own life blood, close to the prime of their lives. It is an awesome responsibility they have left for us. Now it is up to us to see that as far as is humanly possible we dedicate our lives to furthering that kind of freedom on a world wide dimension that they have bequeathed to us. It is up to us to make friends of all the peoples of the earth -- and whatever the cost in time and money and talent and blood is necessary to pay in our turn for the generations that are to come.

Then our sadness over the sight of the millions of military graves all over the globe from all nations and peoples and tongues can enjoy that fulness of life we and so many others have achieved for ourselves.